



SINGLES

A STRATEGIC DEMOGRAPHIC FOR THE GLOBAL CHURCH

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When you think of strategic groups in the church today that need more focus for gospel mission, what comes to mind? Perhaps it is youth, women, young marrieds or seniors. Yet one of the fastest growing emerging segments of our society both outside and inside the church is single adults. Single adults include those never married, divorced, and widowed, with some also being single parents. Whether we are pastors, elders, or lay-leaders, we need to think about singles in our church communities and recognize the strategic role they have to play in our mission to reach the world for Christ.

The rise of single persons as a strategic demographic of society is a global phenomenon. Though the growth of singleness in society is typically associated with Western nations, it is not exclusive to the West. Singles are growing as a proportion of the population in countries on all six major continents. While data in some countries is sometimes sparse, the *Our World in Data* report (<https://ourworldindata.org/>) demonstrates an overall decline in marriage in Latin America, Africa and Asia. In the period of 1990-2010 their findings show a decline in marriage rates in many countries around the world.

In Asia, for example, the growth in singleness has been dramatic. Between 1970 and 2017 marriage rates declined 51 percent in Japan and 43 percent in South Korea. Recent alarm bells have sounded in China where between 2013 and 2019 marriage rates fell 33 percent. Other nations have also followed suit. From 2005–2015 the Philippines Statistics Authority reported a 20 percent decrease in the number of marriages, while the national population was increasing over the same period. A Filipino news story observed that more people are feeling that marriage isn't quite the right thing for them, and that as they feel the need to "be themselves," getting married means losing some of their individuality. Similar patterns of growing singleness are found among various Latin American and African nations.

This demographic shift has been so pronounced in the West in recent decades, that most Western nations today can be aptly described as "marriage-minority cultures". This trend reflects not only declining rates of marriage but also the fragmentation of marriage as other 'marriage-like' relationships and partnerships receive growing social acceptance and legal recognition. Not only are younger generations postponing marriage,

many are questioning the need for the institution altogether. Yet the decline in marriage is not merely being offset by the increase in marriage-like partnerships. The prevailing pattern shows a continual increase of those never married and relationally unattached. Single and unattached persons are an ever-growing proportion of society.

What does the emerging growth of singles mean for the today's church? On the one hand, the church must stand against the fragmentation of marriage by affirming God's biblical design and purpose for marriage. We need to proclaim and model the high view of marriage and sexual relations given in Scripture.

At the same time, the growth of singleness is not a threat to the church or the gospel. Scripture affirms a high view of singleness that is both sexually pure and kingdom inspired. Jesus as God incarnate and the Apostle Paul both modeled healthy singleness and invited others to do likewise. For many centuries of the church, singles were at the forefront leading in theological development, practical helps and missionary fervor. The dramatic growth of the New Testament church in the early centuries was built on the backs of many men and women who followed Jesus in remaining single for sake of the kingdom. Even today, a major global relief agency estimates that 70 percent or more of global relief work is carried out by single persons. The growing demographic of singles should not be seen as a threat to the future of the church, but rather as a strategic discipleship opportunity for the church to revive its initial spirit of sacrificial, passionate and emboldened kingdom expansion.

What is needed today is a renewed biblically grounded vision of singleness, marriage and spiritual family that upholds God at the centre of all our relationships. We need a theology of spiritual family that fully values, empowers, and engages all its members, including those single, married and single again, for the strategic mission of gospel proclamation and kingdom expansion to every tribe and tongue.

This paper is a summary of a larger fully cited version available here:

<https://seeglobal.net/article-singles-matter-emerging-global-demographic/>



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